




DOI: 10.22363/2313-0660-2024-24-3-467-482

EDN: YXJUKG

Research article / Научная статья

European Criticism of China's Human Rights' Policy: Political and Ideological Aspects

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Abstract. For several decades, the issue of human rights has been an instrument of Western pressure on China, and also serves as a pretext for foreign policy decisions (such as the imposition of sanctions). As part of its discursive policy, China has recently shifted from a defensive to an offensive position, including on the issue of human rights. This dynamic is considered in this study using the example of three issues that have been most actively discussed in Western discourse in recent years — Hong Kong, the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region and methods of combating COVID-19. The relevant discourse of China not only defended the right to its own development model, but also highlighted the shortcomings of Western systems. This discursive practice corresponds to the fundamental differences in the understanding of human rights in China and Europe, which are shown in the analysis of the provisions of the second chapter of the People's Republic of China (PRC) Constitution, the Charter of the European Union on Human Rights, and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Despite the fact that European politicians see themselves as the main proponents of democratic rights and freedoms in the world, sociological surveys show a low level of satisfaction of respondents in the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, France and Italy with how the principles of democracy are respected in their own countries, against the backdrop of deep dissatisfaction with their economic situation. Moreover, in many ways, Europe's position does not seem to be principled, but opportunistic, since China's position on the topics mentioned above has not changed, but now European criticism has practically switched to the "Taiwan issue."

Key words: sociological discourse analysis, the People's Republic of China, PRC, Europe, PRC discursive politics

Conflicts of interest. The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions. The authors made an equal contribution to the design, research and preparation of the final article's text.

For citation: Litvak, N. V., & Pomezova, N. B. (2024). European criticism of China's human rights' policy: Political and ideological aspects. *Vestnik RUDN. International Relations*, 24(3), 467–482. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2024-24-3-467-482>

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Европейская критика политики Китая в сфере прав человека: политические и идеологические аспекты

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Аннотация. Тема прав человека на протяжении нескольких десятилетий представляет собой инструмент давления Запада на Китай, а также служит оправданием внешнеполитических решений (например, введения санкций). Китай в рамках своей дискурсивной политики в последнее время перешел от оборонительной позиции к наступательной, в том числе и по вопросу прав человека. Данная тенденция проанализирована в исследовании на примере трех тем, доминировавших в западном дискурсе в последние годы: Гонконг, Синьцзян-Уйгурский автономный район и методы борьбы с COVID-19. Дискурс Китая не только отстаивает право на собственную модель развития, но и активно указывает на недостатки западных систем. Анализ положений второй главы Конституции КНР, Хартии Европейского союза по правам человека, а также Европейской конвенции о защите прав человека и основных свобод позволил авторам выявить ряд принципиальных отличий в понимании прав человека в Китае и Европе. Несмотря на то что европейские политики позиционируют себя в качестве главных проводников демократических прав и свобод в мире, социологические опросы показывают низкий уровень удовлетворенности респондентов в Великобритании, Германии, Франции и Италии своим экономическим положением, а также тем, как соблюдаются принципы демократии в их странах. Кроме того, установлено, что во многом позиция Европы представляется не принципиальной, а конъюнктурной, поскольку по рассматриваемым темам позиции Китая не изменились, но теперь европейская критика сфокусировалась на «тайваньском вопросе».

Ключевые слова: социологический дискурс-анализ, Китайская Народная Республика, КНР, Европа, дискурсивная политика КНР

Заявление о конфликте интересов. Авторы заявляют об отсутствии конфликта интересов.

Вклад авторов. Авторы внесли равнозначный вклад в разработку дизайна, проведение исследования и подготовку текста статьи.

Для цитирования: Литвак Н. В., Помозова Н. Б. Европейская критика политики Китая в сфере прав человека: политические и идеологические аспекты // Вестник Российского университета дружбы народов. Серия: Международные отношения. 2024. Т. 24, № 3. С. 467–482. <https://doi.org/10.22363/2313-0660-2024-24-3-467-482>

Introduction

China, as one of the two largest economies in the world, one of the two most populated countries and a leader in the dynamics of comprehensive development, China is increasingly involved in international processes. Despite the complex nature of this activity (economic, social, technological, cultural), the leading European countries traditionally consider this activity, first of all, in the context of human rights. In this regard, the article considers three aspects.

Firstly, despite the importance of human rights issues, there are global processes that require appropriate policies, in addition to the

internal policies of each country in the international community, as well as regional policies, in this case of the European Union. The strengthening of the global nature of the economy is manifested, in particular, in the fact that political measures such as criticism, sanctions and other restrictions, without linking to the actual circumstances, can and do cause tangible damage to those who implement them.

Secondly, the divergence of the West's 'principled' positions towards different countries, the use of not only double, but also triple, and individual standards, is becoming more and more evident. For example, and perhaps above all, given the very different situation of women and sexual minorities in

Muslim countries and China, with a clear, recognized in the West progress in China with human rights in general, the People's Republic of China (PRC), nevertheless, is not given a 'discount' on the pretext of 'cultural features.' In any case, the energy resources on which Europe's economy and society depend are being quietly imported from the first countries (which, incidentally, are also trying to replace Russian resources), and the world's main workshop is being provoked in every possible way, at least discursively, on the issue of human rights.

Thirdly, the concept of human rights in its Western version has been declared universal, even though it is not only increasingly questioned, but also already has an alternative, in particular the Chinese one. And this alternative version is developed on the political and philosophical grounds proposed in the same West — human rights as an institution in the interest of man.

The most severe criticism of the PRC's human rights policy, particularly from Western countries, in three main areas: the violation of the democratic rights and freedoms of the inhabitants of Hong Kong and the Muslim Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (XUAR), as well as all people on Chinese territory in the course of the fight against the COVID-19 coronavirus epidemic. It is noteworthy that the issue of Tibet, which has long been popular in Western discourse, is actually not mentioned at the moment.

Despite the fact that Europe has noted significant progress in the field of human rights in the PRC,¹ this issue is still used to justify foreign policy behavior, including the sanctions policy, which has become an integral part of international relations. In the context of the escalating struggle for leadership between the

United States and China, the mentioned topic is often used by Washington to influence the intensity of cooperation between the European Union (EU) and China, in which Beijing and Brussels are extremely interested. China's discursive policy, including in the field of human rights, has undergone a shift from a defensive to an offensive stance. Not only does China insist on its own model of development, including in this area, but it also openly proclaims the advantages of the Chinese understanding of human rights over the Western one.

Research Methodology

The object of this study is the European and Chinese discourse on the sensitive issue of human rights and freedoms through the statements of officials from a number of key European countries — namely, Great Britain, Germany, France and Italy regarding China. The subject of the study is the human rights enshrined in the Constitution of the PRC, on the one hand, and the Charter of the European Union on Human Rights, as well as the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, on the other. The latter document was included in the analysis due to the fact that all the above-mentioned countries have joined it, and the United Kingdom (UK) has not been a member of the EU since 2020. A comparative qualitative content analysis of the above-mentioned documents was carried out and, on this basis, their axiological analysis, in order to identify the differences between the Chinese and European perceptions of fundamental human rights. This, according to the authors, can serve as a key to understanding the differences and approaches underlying the China — West discursive confrontation. To confirm the conclusions about the problems experienced by human rights as one of the main discursive factors consolidating the countries of the West, the data from sociological surveys were used.

¹ Rühlig T. How China Approaches International Law: Implications for Europe // European Institute for Asian Studies. May 2018. URL: https://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/EU_Asia_at_a_Glance_Ruhlig_2018_China_International_Law.pdf (accessed: 14.05.2024). See also: (Biddulph & Rosenzweig, 2019).

Analysis of Human Rights Discourse in Great Britain, Germany, France, Italy, and China

Hong Kong

The issue of human rights neglect in Hong Kong began to gain popularity in Western discourse against the backdrop of large-scale protests — the so-called ‘umbrella revolution’ in 2014 (the protesters demanded that Beijing’s approval procedure for participants in the 2017 Hong Kong executive election would be canceled), protest movements in 2019 (the demonstrators opposed the passage of the Extradition Bill), and their relapse in May 2020 amid attempts to pass the Hong Kong national security law.² In Western discourse, China has been heavily accused of having Hong Kong’s national security protection law violate the fundamental freedoms of its people, use vague language that would allow people to be subjected to political repression, make it difficult for foreign companies to conduct business and fulfill their human rights obligations, and signifies the end of the ‘one country, two systems’ principle, depriving Hong Kong of a high degree of autonomy.

In general, the rhetoric of British officials on the situation in Hong Kong can be characterized as sustained in the traditional diplomatic style. So, in 2014, Prime Minister D. Cameron said that “Britain must protect the rights of people in the former British colony.”³ When British parliamentarians were not allowed into Hong Kong during the protests in 2014, he called this decision ‘erroneous and counterproductive.’⁴

² Maizland L., Fong C. Hong Kong’s Freedoms: What China Promised and How It’s Cracking Down // Council on Foreign Relations. March 19, 2024. URL: <https://www.cfr.org/background/hong-kong-freedoms-democracy-protests-china-crackdown> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

³ British Values: Article by David Cameron // UK Government. June 15, 2014. URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/british-values-article-by-david-cameron> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

⁴ British MPs Banned from Hong Kong Visit // Financial Times. November 30, 2014. URL:

In 2018, the next Prime Minister, T. May, and the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, J. Hunt, ‘expressed concern’ about the mass protests caused by the extradition law, and the last British governor of Hong Kong, K. Patten, called the attempts to pass the law “a terrible blow ... to the rule of law, to the stability and security of Hong Kong, on the position of Hong Kong as a major international trade center.”⁵

In 2019–2022, Prime Minister B. Johnson, adhering to restrained rhetoric, came up with an initiative proposing to return to the UK not only to holders of English passports, but also anyone wishing to reside in Hong Kong for a period of five years, with the prospect of obtaining British citizenship. The Chinese Ambassador to London, Liu Xiaoming, reacted harshly to this initiative, describing it as an attempt to interfere in China’s internal affairs and threatening ‘serious consequences’⁶ for Chinese-British relations.

Compared to B. Johnson, the rhetoric against China is used by British Foreign Secretary D. Raab: “China has led the world astray”, “China spits on human rights”, “[the extradition law] creates a bad reputation for the Communist Party in the international arena” etc.⁷

Italian politicians take different positions on China and particularly on the situation in Hong Kong. This was clearly demonstrated by their reaction to the provocative invitation, at

<https://www.ft.com/content/08919562-78ba-11e4-b518-00144feabdc0> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

⁵ China’s Extradition Law Should Respect Hong Kong Deal, Says May // The Guardian. June 12, 2019. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/12/chinas-extradition-law-should-respect-hong-kong-handover-deal-may> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

⁶ China Warns UK of ‘Consequences’ over Hong Kong ‘Interference’ // BBC. July 21, 2020. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-53481397> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

⁷ China ‘Misled World on Hong Kong Security Law, Says Dominic Raab // The Guardian. January 6, 2021. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/06/british-politicians-urge-eu-to-drop-china-deal-after-hong-kong-arrests> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

the initiative of the parliamentarian from the ‘Brothers of Italy’ A. Urso, one of the main leaders of the protest movement, Joshua Wong, to participate in a remote press conference in November 2019. This was followed by an immediate reaction from the Chinese Embassy in Italy, which published a statement on its official website describing the behavior of the “politicians who organized the video conference” as “irresponsible.”⁸

M. Salvini, the leader of the League party, commented on the situation in a harsh tone, noting that “it is impossible to let China tell us what to do and what not to do.” The parliamentarian from the Democratic Party, A. Romano, described such a reaction of the Chinese Embassy as “unprecedented interference,” and the chairman of the ‘Brothers of Italy’ party, J. Meloni, was “shocked by the arrogance and courage” that the Chinese embassy allows itself towards Italy. The position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy, one of the leaders of the Five Star Movement, L. Di Maio, turned out to be the softest. Commenting on the situation, first, he stressed that “We always stand for excellent relations with Beijing, but some events take place in the Italian Parliament every day, and it would be right to respect them.”⁹

The restrained rhetoric of German Chancellor A. Merkel: “I hope that the demonstrators will be able to conduct a dialogue [with the authorities of mainland China] in accordance with democratic freedoms”; “the rights and freedoms must be respected in accordance with the law”;¹⁰ and Foreign

Minister H. Maas: “We support the rights of Hong Kong people within the framework of the “one country, two systems” policy; “we have always advocated that the people of Hong Kong be able to express their opinion”¹¹ regarding the situation in Hong Kong, some politicians in Germany are dissatisfied and criticized. Thus, the Chairman of the Bundestag Committee on Human Rights and Humanitarian Aid, G. Jensen, describes the attitude of A. Merkel and H. Maas as “unprincipled and discouraging.”¹²

China, on the other hand, denies all accusations by claiming that “the actions of law enforcement agencies in Hong Kong are aimed at ensuring security and maintaining order in accordance with the law” and using offensive rhetoric, pointing out that “countries such as the United States, the UK, Canada and Australia have created a strict legal framework for national security that shows no mercy in dealing with offenses that threaten national security.”¹³

It appeared that the protests and pressure from the West made the Chinese authorities back down and withdraw the extradition bill project for 2019. However, the following year, 2020, the National Security Law was passed, and M. Lemos and M. João Costa, for example, defined the situation as ironic. Because the failed Extradition Bill was largely in tune with the basic policies for Hong Kong agreed upon in 1984 between the United Kingdom and the PRC, as well as with the human rights

<https://www.dw.com/en/angela-merkel-calls-for-peaceful-resolution-in-hong-kong/a-50321822> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

¹¹ „Einflussnahme bekannt“: China geht in Deutschland gegen Hongkong-Aktivisten vor // Merkur.de. 13.09.2019. URL: <https://www.merkur.de/politik/hongkong-proteste-maas-verteidigt-treffen-mit-aktivist-joshua-wong-china-erbost-zr-12978086.html> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

¹² Sorge in der EU um Situation in Hongkong // Deutsche Welle. 30.08.2019. URL: <https://www.dw.com/de/sorge-in-der-eu-um-situation-in-hongkong/a-50230293> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

¹³ What’s False and What’s True on China-Related Human Rights Matters // The Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Italy. July 8, 2020. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20201025030525/http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/xwdt/t1804894.htm> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

⁸ Italian MPs ‘Irresponsible’ with Wong — China Embassy // ANSA English. November 29, 2019. URL: https://www.ansa.it/english/news/2019/11/29/italian-mps-irresponsible-with-wong-china-embassy_2d3dfd28-b973-4ce0-9981-c6730e8eaa88.html (accessed: 14.05.2024).

⁹ Cina attacca i politici italiani su Hong Kong. Di Maio: “Sempre ottimi rapporti con Pechino” // Fanpage.it. 29.11.2019. URL: <https://www.fanpage.it/politica/lambasciata-cinese-attacca-i-politici-italiani-per-la-conferenza-su-hong-kong/> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

¹⁰ Angela Merkel Calls for Peaceful Resolution in Hong Kong // Deutsche Welle. June 9, 2019. URL:

protections enshrined therein, but the National Security Law is not (Lemos & Costa, 2022). But even in this situation, some researchers conclude that the protection of fundamental rights in Hong Kong continue to apply (Coxon, 2022). Furthermore, some studies indicate that pro-Western activists in Hong Kong deliberately support populism by educating young people, particularly through the creation of appropriate textbooks. A study of 7 such liberal studies textbooks found that they contained much content stigmatising the Chinese mainland and the heightened division between the inner and outer groups. A division was found between positive images of Hong Kong and negative images of China in the narratives, that can be understood to contain populism (Li, Wu & Xiao, 2023).

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

In the context of the ‘Uyghur issue,’ the main accusations in Western discourse boil down to the mistreatment of Uyghurs in so-called ‘political re-education camps,’ that the fight against terrorism in Xinjiang is a pretext for repressive activities against ethnic minorities, that forced labor is practiced, that the Chinese government practices forced abortion and sterilization of Uyghur women, that China uses the denial of a passport renewal as a way to force Uyghurs living abroad to return to Xinjiang.

In the official British discourse, the sharpest rhetoric comes from Foreign Minister D. Raab: “Arbitrary detention, political re-education, forced labor, torture, sterilization ... all this is truly terrible ... we hoped that barbarism was a thing of the past”¹⁴; “spontaneous detention of more than a million Uighurs and other minorities.”¹⁵ Similar

rhetoric is characteristic of some other British politicians. Thus, J. Hunt, parliamentarians I. Khan, N. Ghani, L. Moran and others have repeatedly spoken out about human rights violations in the XUAR: “Britain should not perceive what is happening in China otherwise than as genocide”; “the amendment on genocide provides an opportunity to rethink [UK] foreign policy.”¹⁶ Despite the pressure in Parliament, B. Johnson, like his predecessor as Prime Minister T. May,¹⁷ treats the Chinese direction of foreign policy quite pragmatically, which is reflected, among other things, in his cautious rhetoric (“in some things we must show rigidity, but we must also interact”,¹⁸ “China is a huge geopolitical factor for us, our children and grandchildren”,¹⁹ “I don’t want our country or government to turn into unthinking Sinophobes.”²⁰ In May 2022, the Secretary of

2021. URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/uk-firms-face-fines-for-chinese-trade-linked-to-labor-camps/> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

¹⁶ See: Topical Questions. Volume 648: Debated on Tuesday 30 October 2018 // UK Parliament. October 30, 2018. URL: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2018-10-30/debates/4EFBC063-CEDD-4FFD-B48B-A22871B5B072/TopicalQuestions?highlight=%22concur%20that%20those%20reports%20are%20broadly%20accurate%22#contribution-334FCC5E-CC27-459D-A0C7-0DCAA4DEFB2D> (accessed: 14.05.2024); Human Rights: Xinjiang. Volume 692: Debated on Thursday 22 April 2021 // UK Parliament. April 22, 2021. URL: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2021-04-22/debates/6FA4F300-D244-443E-A48C-57378876DE54/HumanRightsXinjiang> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

¹⁷ Ma A. Chinese State Media Praises ‘Pragmatic’ Theresa May for not Mentioning Their Atrocious Human Rights While Visiting Them // Business Insider. February 2, 2018. URL: <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-global-times-praises-theresa-may-for-not-mentioning-human-rights-on-trip-2018-2> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

¹⁸ McGuinness A. Boris Johnson Says He Won’t Be ‘Pushed into Becoming a Knee-Jerk Sinophobe’ amid Deterioration in China Ties // Sky News. July 20, 2020. URL: <https://news.sky.com/story/boris-johnson-says-he-wont-be-pushed-into-becoming-a-knee-jerk-sinophobe-amid-deterioration-in-china-ties-12032515> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ UK PM Boris Johnson Warns Against ‘Unthinking Sinophobia’ amid Tensions with China // WION. January 14, 2021. URL: www.wionews.com/world/uk-pm-boris

¹⁴ China’s Treatment of Uighurs Amounts to Torture, Says Dominic Raab // The Guardian. January 12, 2021. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/12/chinas-treatment-of-uighurs-amounts-to-torture-dominic-raab> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

¹⁵ Isaac A. UK Firms Face Fines for Chinese Trade Linked to Forced Labor Camps // Politico. January 12,

State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs and candidate for the post of Prime Minister of Great Britain, L. Truss, made a number of statements condemning human rights violations in the XUAR. For example, she referred to China's "extraordinary persecution of Uyghur Muslims and other ethnic minorities, including forced labor, severe restrictions on religious freedom, separation of parents and their children, forced birth control, and mass incarceration."²¹

The situation in Xinjiang actually has been absent from the official Italian discourse, even though the head of the Vatican, Pope Francis, has paid attention to it.²² Foreign Minister L. Di Maio, known for his sympathy for Beijing and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), commenting on the 'Uighur issue,' manages with general phrases about the commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states and the protection of human rights ("our goal is to protect the rights individual and ethnic minorities").²³ The legislative initiative lobbied by the far-right League party M. Salvini, who proposed calling Beijing's policy towards the Uyghurs 'genocide,' was not supported by the administration of Italian Prime Minister M. Draghi, who has taken a more cautious stance on the issue.²⁴

johnson-warns-against-unthinking-sinophobia-amid-tensions-with-china-356542 (accessed: 14.05.2024).

²¹ China's Human Rights Violations in Xinjiang: Foreign Secretary's Statement // UK Government. May 24, 2022. URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/foreign-secretary-statement-on-xinjiang-24-may-2022> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

²² China Says Pope's Remarks About "Persecuted" Uyghurs Are Groundless // Reuters. November 24, 2020. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/china-says-popes-remarks-about-persecuted-uyghurs-are-groundless-idUSKBN28417Q/> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

²³ Intervista del Ministro Di Maio a Il Foglio // Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. 13.07.2020. URL: https://web.archive.org/web/20200713093328/https://www.esteri.it/mae/it/sala_stampa/interviste/2020/07/intervista-del-ministro-di-maio-a-il-foglio.html (accessed: 14.05.2024).

²⁴ Leali G. Italy Debate on Charges of China 'Genocide' Puts Pressure on Draghi Coalition // Politico. April 6, 2021. URL: [https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-](https://www.politico.eu/article/italy-debate-on-charges-of-china-genocide-puts-pressure-on-draghi-coalition/)

In her address to the Bundestag, Chancellor A. Merkel noted that "Germany and all of Europe have found themselves in the center of rivalry between China and the United States," describing the social structure of China as having a state and sometimes repressive character.²⁵ On the 'Uighur issue,' Merkel insists that it needs to be 'criticized,' however, the chancellor herself is criticized by her German colleagues for being too soft on the situation in Xinjiang. Consequently, the head of the German parliament's human rights committee, G. Jensen, calls on A. Merkel "to include Xinjiang on the agenda of the Council of Europe meeting to discuss the prospects for the introduction of pan-European sanctions."²⁶

Despite Human Rights Watch's China Challenge to Olaf Scholz, published by Human Rights Watch, which notes "the worst period of repression by the Chinese government since the brutal crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Tiananmen Square" and called on "the German government, together with allies in the European Union, to impose sanctions on official persons responsible for the oppression of the Uyghurs and other national minorities," Chancellor O. Scholz is taking a pragmatic approach, preferring not to allow diplomatic escalation.²⁷

China, on the other hand, denies accusations of violating the rights and freedoms of Uyghurs in "vocational education and training centers" in Xinjiang. It asserts that "their nature is no different from public

debate-on-charges-of-china-genocide-puts-pressure-on-draghi-coalition/ (accessed: 14.05.2024).

²⁵ Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel im Deutschen Bundestag // Der Bundeskanzler. 27.11.2021. URL: <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/rede-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-im-deutschen-bundestag-1699682> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

²⁶ Rahn W. Germany Stays Quiet on China Rights Abuses // Deutsche Welle. May 12, 2019. URL: <https://www.dw.com/en/why-is-germany-silent-on-chinas-human-rights-abuses/a-51545962> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

²⁷ Roth K. The China Challenge for Olaf Scholz // Human Rights Watch. May 20, 2022. URL: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/20/china-challenge-olaf-scholz> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

correctional institutions in the U.S. and the UK, and deradicalization centers in France. All are useful preventive counter-terrorism measures and are in line with the principles and spirit of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy and other counter-terrorism resolutions.”²⁸

In response to allegations of violations of religious freedom and the destruction of mosques in Xinjiang, the Chinese authorities posted information on the official websites of the PRC Embassies in some European countries that “the number of mosques in Xinjiang has grown from 2000 at the beginning of reforms and opening in the late 1970s to 24,400 today, more than 10 times more than in the United States. And the population of the XUAR (fending off accusations of genocide and forced sterilization of Uyghur women) from 1978 to 2018, the Uyghur population in Xinjiang increased from 5.55 million to 11.68 million.”²⁹ The same document repeatedly mentions the precedents of infringement of the rights of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, in particular, the resonant situation surrounding the murder of G. Floyd on May 25, 2020 as a vivid example of the violation of the rights and freedoms of African Americans as an ethnic minority.

Political engagement is also present in many scientific studies (Roberts, 2018; Finley, 2019; Çaksu, 2020). For example, even when the task is to compare Western and Chinese discourses, the research text begins with a statement of the existence of “crimes against humanity” — that is, before posing the problem and presenting the results of its research (Çiçek, 2022).

Today, a significant amount of scientific literature has already been written on the situation in the XUAR, and it is possible to identify the main difference in the approaches

of Western researchers and their Chinese and other colleagues. In the West, they proceed from the fact that there is an inter-ethnic, religious and even inter-cultural conflict in the region, and in the East — that the security problem should not have an ethnic, religious, political or any other aspect. But H. Aryodiguno argues that the Chinese government prohibits not a religion but radical acts in the name of religion committed by adherents of that religion. He also defines the Chinese nationalism spirit as “a concept where ethnic equality, national unity, shared prosperity, and development are within the framework of one Chinese” and that the Western media accuses China of violating human rights under the presuppositions of Western-Centrism (Aryodiguno, 2021).

V.S. Novichkov recalls that this is a region where most of the heterogeneous population consists of non-Han peoples, with a total of about 47 ethnic groups (about 62.05% of the total population). In addition, the region is distinguished by its multi-confessional nature, with Islam being the most widespread practiced by the majority of the population (Uigurs, Hui, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, etc.). He makes a conclusion that the central government emphasizes socio-economic development of the region, equalization of the living standards of the local non-Han population to the level of the eastern provinces along, confronting different security challenges and threats due to ethnic nationalism, separatism, terrorism and religious extremism (Novichkov, 2017). This does not mean that there are no problems in this policy. However, the authorities are demonstrating an ability to critically reflect on the results and make appropriate, usually effective, changes in their policies to combat extremism and terrorism in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (Moiseev, 2021).

²⁸ What’s False and What’s True on China-Related Human Rights Matters // The Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Italy. July 8, 2020. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20201025030525/http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/xwtd/t1804894.htm> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

²⁹ Ibid.

COVID-19

Another topic of intense debate surrounding China was the issue of alleged human rights violations by the Chinese

authorities in response to the spread of COVID-19, in particular, that the lockdown measures in Wuhan violated the freedoms of its residents, the neglect of the right to freedom of speech and the confidentiality of personal data. It is noteworthy that the European Convention on Human Rights refers to the legality of “the detention of persons for the purpose of preventing the spread of infectious diseases” (Article 5, paragraph e).³⁰

China is also accused of violating human rights during the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the Chinese government has been accused of attempting to cover up the emergence of a new virus, which subsequently infected a significant number of individuals worldwide. Furthermore, the Chinese government has been accused of violating the rights of residents of Wuhan, including the right to freedom of speech, which encompasses the right to freedom of expression online, as well as the right to freedom of the press and medical workers.

B. Johnson is not trying to shift the responsibility for the spread of the virus to China, and the statements of the Minister of Foreign Affairs D. Raab, on the contrary, are sharply anti-Chinese.³¹

Although the leaders of France and Germany — E. Macron and A. Merkel — have repeatedly called on China to be more transparent about the infected and dead, both leaders are in no hurry to join the provocative American hysteria around China’s responsibility for the spread of the virus.³²

³⁰ Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ETS No. 005) // Council of Europe. URL: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treatyid=005> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

³¹ China Will Have to Answer Hard Questions on Coronavirus Outbreak: UK Foreign Minister // Reuters. April 16, 2020. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-britain-china/china-will-have-to-answer-hard-questions-on-coronavirus-outbreak-uk-foreign-minister-idUSKBN21Y2SV/> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

³² See: Nussbaum A. Macron Calls on China to Be More Transparent on Covid Shots // Bloomberg.

The leader of the League, M. Salvini, has repeatedly made extremely negative, pro-American assessments of Beijing’s behaviour in relation to COVID-19,³³ using this sharp agenda for domestic political purposes, contrasting his ‘principled’ position with the soft rhetoric of the current government, in particular Prime Minister D. Conte and Foreign Minister L. Di Maio.

The issue of the emergence of the COVID-19 virus, which the United States is speculating on, has not yet exhausted itself in a discursive dimension, given the fact that the Chinese socialist political system has shown itself to be effective in a crisis situation. The representatives of China noted that, “by recognizing the right to life as a fundamental human right, the Chinese government is putting people’s lives first.” On the contrary, the U.S. government has ignored science, downplayed the threat of the virus, and even resorted to shifting the blame. This led to a massive outbreak of disease in the country, costing the lives and health of many Americans, plunging the economy into recession, and causing social upheaval.³⁴

Despite the fact that the data of sociological surveys conducted in 2021 in European countries show a predominantly negative attitude towards the implementation of human rights and freedoms in China (84% of

February 4, 2021. URL: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-04/macron-calls-on-china-to-be-more-transparent-on-covid-shots> (accessed: 14.05.2024); Lau S., Wong C. Germany Pushes China for Answers to Coronavirus Origin // SCMP. April 21, 2020. URL: <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3080918/germany-pushes-china-answers-coronavirus-origin-adding> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

³³ Salvini: “Italia pretenda dalla Cina la verità sulla pandemia. Da Conte silenzio imperdonabile” // Il Primato Nazionale. 12.07.2020. URL: <https://www.ilprimatonazionale.it/primo-piano/salvini-italia-verita-cina-pandemia-conte-silenzio-imperdonabile-159657/> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

³⁴ What’s False and What’s True on China-Related Human Rights Matters // The Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Italy. July 8, 2020. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20201025030525/http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/xwdt/t1804894.htm> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

respondents in the UK, 85% in Germany, in France — 83%, in Italy — 89%), in the same countries there is a predominantly positive assessment of the effectiveness of China's policy in the fight against COVID-19 (in the UK — 48% positively assess China's efforts in this direction, in Germany — 49%, in France — 54%, in Italy — 65%), and in all the studied European countries, the percentage of those who positively evaluate the “zero tolerance” policy increased by 10–14% compared to 2020.³⁵

In our opinion, it is the policy during the pandemic that is most indicative, since the topics discussed above are politicized, and in the situation with COVID-19, there is the possibility of using statistical data. Thus, with the end of the pandemic, studies have already appeared, including comparative ones, on how different countries coped with it, and even what the impact of the human rights factor was. It is expected that the Chinese specialists preferred their model, however, in this case, the corresponding arguments were presented. In particular, China turned out to be the only country with a large economy in which, during the pandemic, gross domestic product (GDP) did not fall, but grew, albeit not as significantly as before (Petushkova, 2021).

Ding Difeng and Zhang Ruilian conclude that the important takeaway from China's pandemic prevention and control was to respect science. So Chinese scientists were able to analyze COVID-19 calmly and scientifically. And the Chinese society has demonstrated its unity and cooperation at all its levels (Ding & Zhang, 2022). They also resume that China's control strategies slowed the spread of the global pandemic and that Chinese vaccines have promoted global vaccine equity.

T.N. Seregina, A.A. Evlakh, S.N. Kuzmin, having studied the opposite policies of

organizing the fight against the pandemic — in China (model of strict isolation) and Sweden (“herd immunity” model), came to an unambiguous conclusion about the effectiveness of the first and the failure of the second. It is also interesting that the authors take into account differences in their socio-cultural underpinnings — mental for the Chinese model and the socio-political for the Swedish model (Seregina, Evlakh & Kuzmin, 2021).

Zhao Rong and Xu Fengcai demonstrated the advantages of the Chinese model in fighting the coronavirus, which has been widely reported in the Russian media. The Chinese authorities reacted quickly and highly organized, always putting people's lives above everything else and, as a result, securing the people's trust. So, China has clearly demonstrated its humanistic strategy (Zhao & Xu, 2021). However, as J.S. Rošker shows, instead of taking advantage of this positive experience, Western policymakers have focused on what they see as the authoritarian methods of the Chinese leadership in its fight against the pandemic, allegedly linked to the authoritarian political traditions of the Sinic East and Southeast Asian areas. The researcher herself consistently argues that such a global-scale pandemic can only be solved on the global level — in context of intercultural dialogues with the aim of constructing a new, global ethics (Rošker, 2021). And an objective obstacle to such a development of events is the political reality, including that recorded in official documents.

Comparative Analysis of Some Human Rights Provisions Enshrined in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, the EU Charter of Human Rights and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms

The documents selected for analysis cover three categories of human rights — civil, socio-economic and political.

The Chinese Constitution consists of a preamble, four chapters and 143 articles. In the

³⁵ Silver L., Devlin K., Huang C. Large Majorities Say China Does Not Respect the Personal Freedoms of Its People // Pew Research Center. June 30, 2021. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/30/large-majorities-say-china-does-not-respect-the-personal-freedoms-of-its-people/> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

second chapter *Basic Rights and Obligations of Citizens* includes 23 articles (33–56).³⁶

The Charter of the European Union on Human Rights consists of a preamble and 7 chapters in total of 54 Articles (including general provisions): *Dignity* (Art. 1–5), *Freedom* (Art. 6–19), *Equality* (Art. 20–26), *Solidarity* (Art. 27–38), *Citizens' Rights* (Art. 39–46), *Justice* (Art. 47–50), *General Provisions* (Art. 51–54).³⁷

The European Convention on Human Rights consists of 59 Articles, the section *Rights and Freedoms* includes 17 of them (Art. 2–18).³⁸

All three categories of rights are described in more detail in European documents than in the Chinese. Both speak of the right to peaceful assembly, while the PRC Constitution only defines clear concepts without any additional characteristics.

In contrast to the European documents studied, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China devotes a great deal of attention to duties and obligations to the state, namely the obligation to “pay taxes in accordance with the law,” to “protect the security, honor and interests of the Motherland,” to “protect the unity of the country and the unity of all its nationalities.”³⁹ According to the document, citizens also have the obligation to be educated and to work, parents have the obligation to bring up children and adult children have the obligation to support them. In the European documents in the

mentioned context, it is about opportunities and freedoms, but not about duties. For example, in the EU Charter, freedom of choice of education provides for the opportunity to receive it free of charge.⁴⁰

Another feature of the Chinese document that distinguishes it from its European counterparts is a clear hierarchy, in the spirit of core socialist values, from the general to the particular, from the state to society and the individual. The opposition to the Western model is obvious, where, according to the liberal idea, the person and his rights are in the first place. Thus, Article 51 of the Constitution of the PRC states: “When exercising their freedoms and rights, citizens of the People's Republic of China must not harm the interests of the state, society and the collective, the legitimate freedoms and rights of other citizens.”⁴¹

In other words, the rights and freedoms of Chinese citizens end where they run counter to the interests, first of all, of the state, secondly of society, thirdly of the collective, and at least — of the individual, that is, another citizen of the PRC. That is, the statement that my freedom ends where the freedom of another person begins, which lies in the plane of European understanding, in China sounds like “My freedom ends where the interests of the state and the collective begin.” Other researchers have also investigated these differences from a similar position (Tsvyk & Tsvyk, 2019).

Attitudes of Citizens of the UK, Germany, France and Italy to the Way Democratic Rights and Freedoms Are Realized in Their Countries

Despite the many criticisms of Western-style democracy and the many problems faced

³⁶ Constitution of the People's Republic of China (as amended in 2018) // Chinalaw.Center. (In Russian). URL: https://chinalaw.center/constitutional_law/china_constituti_on_revised_2018_russian/ (accessed: 14.05.2024).

³⁷ Charter of Fundamental Rights of European Union // EUR-Lex. October 26, 2012. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

³⁸ Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ETS No. 005) // Council of Europe. URL: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=treaty-detail&treaty-num=005> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

³⁹ Constitution of the People's Republic of China (as amended in 2018) // Chinalaw.Center. (In Russian). URL: https://chinalaw.center/constitutional_law/china_constituti_on_revised_2018_russian/ (accessed: 14.05.2024).

⁴⁰ Charter of Fundamental Rights of European Union // EUR-Lex. October 26, 2012. URL: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:12012P/TXT> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

⁴¹ Constitution of the People's Republic of China (as amended in 2018) // Chinalaw.Center. (In Russian). URL: https://chinalaw.center/constitutional_law/china_constituti_on_revised_2018_russian/ (accessed: 14.05.2024).

by the EU countries (falling incomes, the growing gap between rich and poor, the migration crisis, etc.), Europe still sees itself as the defender and leader of liberal values and democratic regimes in the world. However, a sociological survey conducted in 2020 showed that 69% of respondents in the UK, 68% in Italy and 58% in France are not satisfied with the way democracy is being implemented in their country. German citizens are more positive about the implementation of democratic rights and freedoms — 65% of respondents to the question “Are you satisfied with the way democracy ‘works’ in your country?” answered positively.⁴² At the same time, however, 45% of respondents in Germany believe that elected politicians do not care how citizens perceive their actions. The same view is shared by 79% of respondents in the UK, 78% in Italy and 65% in France.⁴³

According to public opinion polls, residents of developed European countries would like to see their states democratic, but they are not satisfied with the way democracy is implemented in practice by their governments and express a desire to reform the existing political systems in their countries. Thus, 14% of the British are convinced that the political system in the UK needs a total transformation, 38% would like to see its significant reform, 32% recognize the need for partial changes, and 13% are satisfied with its current state. In Germany, the same figures are at the level of 15%, 37%, 32% and 13%, respectively. That is, a total of 52% of respondents are in favor of cardinal and significant. In France, 23% are confident in the need for total changes, 50% — significant, 18% would be satisfied with a partial reform, and only 7% are satisfied with the current state of affairs. In Italy, 42% and 47% of respondents were in favor of fundamental and significant reforms,

⁴² Wike R., Schumacher Sh. Satisfaction with Democracy // Pew Research Center. February 27, 2020. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/27/satisfaction-with-democracy/> (accessed on: 14.05.2024).

⁴³ Ibid.

respectively, 8% indicated the need for minor changes and only 1% expressed satisfaction with the functioning of the political system.⁴⁴

It is also noteworthy that dissatisfaction with the way in which democratic human rights are being implemented is demonstrated to a greater extent by respondents in those countries in which, according to sociological surveys, people are not satisfied with the economic situation in their country either. Thus, 78% of Italians, 72% of the French, 74% of the British and 63% of the Germans consider the current economic situation to be bad.⁴⁵

Discussion

Not only Western researchers,⁴⁶ but also Russian experts note that, of course, there is an institution of human rights in the PRC and this institution is actively developing as part of a long-term general reform of the legal system based on the rule-of-law. In addition, as I.E. Denisov (2015) emphasizes, many Western liberal principles are used for this reform, for example, the strengthening of an independent judiciary, greater transparency of governance, introducing mechanisms of feedback between society and power. Although, of course, there are significant differences. The same I.E. Denisov believes that the reforms are taking place in the context of criticism of universal Western values, which has one target, and that is the rejection of the multiparty system and adversarial contest of political platforms (Denisov, 2015). But A. Tsvyk, like many other

⁴⁴ Wike R., Fetterlorf J. Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety // Pew Charitable Trusts. May 27, 2022. URL: <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/spring-2022/global-public-opinion-in-an-era-of-democratic-anxiety> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

⁴⁵ Wike R., Schumacher Sh. Satisfaction with Democracy // Pew Research Center. February 27, 2020. URL: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/02/27/satisfaction-with-democracy/> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

⁴⁶ Rühlig T. How China Approaches International Law: Implications for Europe // European Institute for Asian Studies. May 2018. URL: https://www.eias.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/EU_Asia_at_a_Glance_Ruhlig_2018_China_International_Law.pdf (accessed: 14.05.2024).

experts, pays attention primarily to other rights that are considered paramount in modern China. First of all, it is the right of the Chinese people to exist and develop (Tsvyk, 2017). A.V. Lomanov notes, that the concept of the “common destiny of mankind” acts as a target justification for promoting the average interpretation of human rights in the outside world while China is striving to become a point of attraction, first of all, for developing countries (Lomanov, 2022).

Europeans also see human rights as a constant, while the Chinese see them as a variable. The first and obvious vulnerability of the European position is the very existence of the task and practice of protecting human rights. But do constants need to be protected? Is it necessary to issue laws to protect the fact that the gravitational acceleration on our planet is 9.81 m/s^2 ? Despite the constant statements, declarations and laws about the “inalienability” of certain “fundamental” rights, they, of course, are inalienable.

Firstly, simply because they are a historical phenomenon, and therefore, the way they were formulated and introduced (for example, the right to the Internet or the choice of gender), they can be canceled.

Secondly, they are practically taken away, and by the very same Europeans. Of course, with the appropriate verbal and legal balancing act — “in accordance with the law”, but they “restrict the rights” of criminals (changing the elements of crimes) and incapacitated (changing the definition of legal capacity), having abolished the death penalty in their country, they allow the use of lethal weapons (law enforcement agencies in their own countries and even more so abroad), and so on.

Under the influence of fashionable and increasingly extremist political tendencies, the West is gradually moving away even from such ‘universal’ rights as the right to freedom of speech — primarily within the woke ideology, as well as from the principle of equality, legitimizing (!) positive discrimination in favor of more and more minorities. It is also

important that the supposed universalism of human rights, primarily the right to life, so fiercely propagated by the West, for some reason allows for the existence of fundamental disagreements between the U.S. and the EU over the death penalty. All this can serve as a strong argument in favor of N.V. Vechkanova’s conclusion that in modern China a socialist positivist concept of human rights with “Chinese characteristics” has been formed, which considers human rights as the result of state lawmaking (Vechkanova, 2010).

Unlike the *historical* nature of, for example, the right to choose one’s gender, the right to “a standard of living, including food, clothing, housing, medical care and necessary social services, adequate for the maintenance of health and well-being,” solemnly proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the UN, is objective, independent of the will of the UN and the states united in this organization (Art. 25).⁴⁷ Without food and water, any person will die within a few days, regardless of any laws, declarations and the activity of human rights organizations. Dealing with human rights issues abroad, the EU is gradually losing its arguments, less and less confident in solving its own internal problems. The PRC not only set itself the task of eradicating poverty, but also announced its solution. And for all the differences in living standards and calculation methods, the complexity of statistics, and so on, the World Bank has been putting China in first place in the world in terms of GDP, calculated not nominally, but in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) for more than one year.⁴⁸ In addition, opinion polls conducted in the UK, Germany, France and Italy demonstrate the dissatisfaction of their own citizens with the way their democratic rights are respected

⁴⁷ Universal Declaration of Human Rights // United Nations. (In Russian). URL: https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/declarations/declhr.shtml (accessed: 14.05.2024).

⁴⁸ GDP Per Capita, PPP (current international \$) // World Bank Group. URL: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

against the backdrop of a deteriorating economic situation.

At the level of the EU, in contrast to the statements of Brussels officials, more and more pan-European public organizations express concern about the current situation and prospects. In particular, on the issues under discussion, regarding the transition to a new, green and digital economy, the European trade unions declare the need for its “socially just” implementation, as well as an “updated social contract that provides for decent wages, workers’ rights, ... adequate social protection, strengthening social dialogue and collective bargaining.”⁴⁹ And even the European patronage declares its concern not only about the aggravation of problems, everything, that is, small, medium and large businesses, but also about the fact that, in particular, when shaping the social reaction of the EU and its member states to the COVID-19 crisis, “they were not properly consulted in the development of national recovery and resilience plans.”⁵⁰

Conclusion

The problem of human rights is one of the main issues in the discursive confrontation between the PRC and the West, which uses it as a tool to put pressure on the Chinese leadership and legitimize its foreign policy. An analysis of the discourse on three main topics (Hong Kong, XUAR and COVID-19) shows that Beijing has moved from a defensive stance to an offensive rhetoric — it has begun not only to explain its actions and defend its own development path, but also to point out its advantages over the principles of Western democracy. This is particularly evident in the discourse surrounding the methods used to combat the spread of COVID-19, where objective indicators show

that China’s political model is more effective than the Western one. Therefore, European criticism of the PRC’s approach to this issue appears to be more of an excuse for its own lesser effectiveness.

The main difference in approaches to human rights issues in the EU and China is conceptual. Europeans see human rights as a *constant*, while the Chinese see them as a *variable*. Discursive disagreement on the issue of human rights is based on differences in their understanding. These, in particular, include increased attention in the PRC to the state not only as the guarantor of observance of the rights of citizens, but also as an institution to which citizens have a number of duties. In European documents, it is mainly about human rights and freedoms. Another important difference is the presence of a value hierarchy: if the European understanding of rights and freedoms is human-centered, then the Chinese one is built in accordance with the value hierarchy according to the principle “state — society — person.”

China sees the economic development of the state as the guarantor of the realization of the right of its citizens to a secure life, without which the very concept of “human rights and freedoms” is abstract. The ideological aspect is, of course, present in this process. But it is not at all about the denial, in this case by the communists, of capitalism per se (both concepts, by the way, are also Western). It was progressive, seeking and achieving, contrary to the arbitrariness of the monarchs, many rights and freedoms for ordinary people, even if in practice they are most effectively implemented only for the owners. But modern societies are wage societies. Most people depend not only on a particular employer, but on the total capitalist, including the state. Yes, and the modern capitalist state has many social achievements. However, living on welfare is very different from the life of a person who receives a salary corresponding to his skilled work. And any hired worker is still under pressure from both Marx’s “reserve army of labor” and the

⁴⁹ Principaux messages issus du sommet social tripartite // Le Conseil de l’Union européenne. 20.10.2021. URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/fr/press/press-releases/2021/10/20/main-messages-from-the-tripartite-social-summit-20-october-2021/> (accessed: 14.05.2024).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

employer, who aims at his own profit. But even from a formal legal point of view, China fully fulfills its international obligations in this context. All this suggests that Beijing's discursive policy is increasingly emphasizing the advantages of its development model.

In the light of the above, the position of the West looks much more ideological, politicized and opportunistic. The historicity of all social institutions presupposes their emergence and development in different countries at different times and in different ways. This alone would be enough to encourage further steps along this

human rights path, as the West does in relation to Muslim countries in particular, and not to increase the criticism that can be observed against Beijing. It is also noteworthy in this context that political opportunism, rather than adherence to principle, is manifested in the fact that all three of the above-mentioned issues are now on the periphery of the EU's attention, which has now shifted to the 'Taiwan crisis,' and that the Tibetan issue, which has long been popular in Western discourse, is actually not mentioned at all at the moment.

Received / Поступила в редакцию: 15.11.2022

Revised / Доработана после рецензирования: 28.05.2024

Accepted / Принята к публикации: 26.06.2024

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